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How a solo advisor taps tech for top efficiency: Show Me Your Stack
By Rob Burgess
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Welcome to "Show Me Your Stack," a series from Financial Planning in which we interview those who deliver financial advice to learn what tools they rely on to make it happen. Rising client expectations are driving the need for more powerful tech tools, and we're digging deep to find out why advisors prefer certain solutions.

Christopher Hensley, president and CEO of Houston First Financial Group, in Bellaire, Texas, serves a very unique niche.

Hensley focuses on retirement planning for state employees. His clients generally work either in health care, for the University of Texas Health Science Center or in higher education and are covered under the Teacher Retirement System of Texas or the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's optional retirement program.

"I help them coordinate their Social Security and their pension," he said.

Typically, his clients are five to 10 years away from retirement or are on the other side, living off their distributions after decades-long careers.

Hensley, who entered the financial services industry after graduating from the University of Houston, worked with Merrill Lynch, UBS and other firms before founding Houston First Financial Group more than a decade ago. He has also worked with the nonprofit Money Management International and has delivered financial literacy seminars to dozens of Houston and Gulf Coast companies. In 2012, he began hosting the KPFT radio show and podcast, "Money Matters."

Today, Houston First Financial has two employees and $72 million in assets under management. With such a small staff, Hensley said he has intentionally built "a streamlined, tech-driven practice that keeps operations lean" and that can be run by only himself and an assistant at all times. But when his assistant left the firm in October 2024, he saw an opportunity instead of a setback.

"Rather than rehire right away, I challenged myself to reexamine my tech stack—making sure I fully understand every tool I pay for and that all integrations are turned on," he said. "When I do bring someone in, they won't be stuck in busy work like data entry. Instead, they'll focus on building deeper relationships with clients."

Hensley said now integration is a "moving target."

"A lot of advisors will just get in their comfort zone, where if it's worked for many years, they'll just keep doing it," he said. "But in the last three years, so much stuff has rolled out. I'm taking this as an opportunity to go back and make sure that we're using everything."

Scroll down the slideshow to see what Hensley feels are some of the most important pieces of Houston First Financial Group's tech stack and why — and which tools didn't work out.

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CRM: Wealthbox
"I'm with Wealthbox now, but I'm saying that after 20 years of being with Redtail. This was a hard thing for me to do.

"After Orion acquired Redtail, they raised the price a lot. They brought in a lot of tools that were really cool, but the problem for me was that I was already going out and getting the best in class. So if I wanted something for this, that or the other, I literally already had other à la carte software. So bundling it together just seemed like a price hike for me. So, sheepishly and nervously, I went into the idea of migrating all of my CRM data over to Wealthbox.

"I have been pleasantly surprised with Wealthbox. The user interface for Wealthbox is completely different than Redtail. It's almost like social media. So when it was my assistant and me, there was this feed, so I didn't have to bug her. Because it'll come into my feed when she touches a client, which is a different way to go at it than what I was doing when I was working with Redtail. I like it. It's, in some instances, a lot simpler. Redtail can do a whole bunch of stuff. But, right out of the box, [Wealthbox] seemed a little bit easier."

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Financial planning: MoneyGuidePro
"I've always used MoneyGuidePro. I'm familiar with a lot of the other ones. I also use the enterprise version of their competitor, eMoney, but I only use it for the Vault.

"But the reason I stick with MoneyGuidePro is that I consider that one the gold standard. I think you've got to meet people where they're at. And I think generally, most people get bogged down in the numbers and the cash flow, where it's impressive to us as financial advisors and high analytics. Most people, that's going to block them out. So the graphs, the charts, the colors and the pictures that MoneyGuidePro allows me to use in the plans are what keeps the client interested when I'm having that conversation. I haven't had to change. I've always kept my finger on the pulse of all the stuff that's out there, but that one's been tried and true for me for many years."

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Data integration: PreciseFP
"PreciseFP is one that took me a long time to realize what that was for and how to use it. Now that I'm using it, I'm like, 'Where have you been all my life?' … PreciseFP is the glue that holds my tech stack together. It syncs seamlessly between MoneyGuidePro and Wealthbox, eliminating redundant data entry and saving me a ton of time.

"As someone who loves automation, I've had to remind myself not to reinvent the wheel. PreciseFP already has many built-in features that make my life easier. It keeps my planning process smooth and lets me focus on strategy rather than admin work."

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Retirement income planning: Income Lab
"I am one of these people that they tell you about — advisors that have been using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for many years.

"I had my own what I call 'retirement income paycheck,' which was a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which just was a distribution of [client] assets, pension and Social Security. I did everything by hand, and it worked. But, man, when I saw what Income Lab was doing with the guardrail approach, that was something that I knew about, that we used, but it wasn't integrated into the actual illustrations that we showed to the clients. For the same reason I use MoneyGuidePro, it's very visual. It's able to explain a lot of the stuff that I had been manually drawing out and talking about."

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Tax planning: Holistiplan
"Holistiplan has been very useful for me because of the advice that you can give the clients. That actually saves them money and is proactive on their having to do the tax prep piece.

"For years we have talked about Roth conversions as a strategy. But if you don't know what tax bracket you're in, Holistiplan has the clients share the tax returns with us. That puts us in a position where we know if there are these income valleys where that would be a good strategy. That's just one piece of it. It does a whole bunch of other stuff."

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